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**Geopolitics and Nuclear Order:  
The Nuclear Planning Environment in 2015**

Brad Roberts

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## **PREFACE**

This document was prepared in partial fulfillment of the task entitled "Requirements for Extended Stewardship of U.S. Strategic Systems." The author is grateful for comments on the arguments presented here in various seminars arranged by Los Alamos National Laboratory and for comments on earlier drafts of this paper by Victor Utgoff and Catherine Montie. The ideas presented are the author's own and are not endorsed by IDA or its sponsors.

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## SUMMARY

With the end of the Cold War and demise of the Soviet Union nearly a decade ago, the American debate about nuclear weapons shifted to new ground. It is now dominated by two opposing camps, the *nuclear abolitionists* and the *nuclear guardians*. These two camps see the world in starkly contrasting terms, though they seem rarely to debate the assumptions that underpin their worldviews.

But worldviews will shape policy. The nuclear planning environment as it might exist in the year 2015 will be shaped fundamentally by how policymakers understand the principal themes of international politics and the new challenges posed by changing relations of power among major and minor actors in the interstate system. By thinking through a range of feasible alternative international orders in the year 2015, it is possible to get beyond simple best- and worst-case projections of the future. This helps to illuminate the range of demands, both political and operational, that might be put on the nuclear posture of the United States.

Whether the world will become more multipolar or unipolar, or whether new variants of bipolarity or even non-polarity will emerge cannot be known today. We can anticipate, however, both benign and stressing variants of each. Relatively benign environments may lead U.S. policymakers to conclude that the numbers and types of deployed weapons may not matter very much; survivability and to an increasing extent safety would seem likely to matter much more. In the relatively stressing environments, numbers and types would likely matter a good deal more. In some variants, renewed theater nuclear roles are likely; while in others extended deterrence matters hardly at all.

Because the nuclear planning environment of 2015 will reflect the politics of interstate relations at the time, there is much that the United States can do to bring into being the circumstances that best suit its interests. Indeed, the nuclear future will be determined as much by choices America makes about geopolitics as by the choices it makes about nuclear weapons. The lead-but-hedge nomenclature adopted by the Clinton administration will be re-worked by future administrations wanting to put their stamp on policy, but the twin principles are likely to guide nuclear strategy so long as the nuclear

future remains uncertain—along with the challenges of balancing them. Here too, requirements are likely to vary considerably depending on the prevailing character of interstate relations.

## **GEOPOLITICS AND NUCLEAR ORDER: THE NUCLEAR PLANNING ENVIRONMENT IN 2015**

With the demise of the Soviet Union nearly a decade ago, the American debate about nuclear weapons shifted to new ground. The debate about how to live safely in a Cold War overshadowed by the risk of nuclear Armageddon has given way to a debate about how hard and fast to pursue deemphasis and abolition in the present uncertain peace. Two camps have emerged.

One camp sees the nuclear business as a kind of sunset industry for America. Its adherents believe that the conditions that make possible nuclear abolition are either present or proximate. This belief is grounded in a certain view of history: they tend to see nuclear weapons as a step-child of the Cold War, and thus as having lost their place in a world in which the major powers no longer seriously contemplate possible wars of annihilation against one another. Their belief is also grounded in a certain view of the future: that the drift of events is toward a world in which nuclear weapons must inevitably play little or no role. They fret over the possibility that others may find new excuses not to relinquish nuclear weapons. Accordingly, they tend to resist any discussion of the possible role of nuclear weapons in deterring regional aggressors, especially in deterring their use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) other than nuclear ones.

The other camp proceeds from an entirely different set of premises. Adherents of this group believe that the conditions that make possible nuclear abolition cannot be brought into being—now and probably ever. Their belief is also grounded in a certain view of history: they tend to see nuclear weapons not as an accident of the Cold War but as a result of the competition among major powers that has dominated the 20th century. Indeed, they believe that nuclear weapons have revolutionized relations among the major powers to make war between or among them virtually impossible. Looking to the future, they tend to see nuclear weapons as essential to the great power role of the United States, and thus as necessary trump cards to any actor, major or minor, that might contemplate



aggression against the United States, its allies, or its other interests abroad. They fret over the political challenges of sustaining the nuclear deterrent for future requirements during an era in which the commitment to that deterrent has been temporarily eclipsed by the celebrated escape from Armageddon. For the sake of argument, let us call these two camps the *nuclear abolitionists* and the *nuclear guardians*.<sup>1</sup>

These two camps have come into much sharper definition over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Because there is so little actual substantive dialogue between them, it would be unfair to say that the interaction among them has defined the debate about what is possible and necessary in the nuclear domain. The Clinton administration has attempted to bridge the gap between the two, with a nuclear strategy organized around the lead-but-hedge principle, by which it seeks to de-emphasize and reduce nuclear weapons as far and fast as prudent while also hedging against a halt in this process by maintaining a viable strategic posture. But the stalemate between the two camps has produced a kind of paralysis in national debate. Looking to the future, this could have terrible consequences. Policymaking could come to be dominated by first one camp and then the other, generating sharp swings in U.S. policy and a growing reputation for unpredictability on the world scene. Or it could produce gridlock in policy and an inability to make choices and implement policies with an eye on medium- and long-term national interests.

The opening premise of this paper is that we cannot think clearly about and plan prudently for the future nuclear problem if our view of the future is so narrowly constrained by best- or worst-case analyses, simple linear projections, and dubious historical analogies. It is necessary to "unsimplify" our view of the future in order to gain

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<sup>1</sup> In characterizing these two camps, it is tempting to fall back on the simple nomenclature, anti- and pro-nuclear. But these labels are misleading. Among the abolitionists are many who supported the nuclear deterrent during the Cold War. Among the guardians are many who would prefer a world in which nuclear weapons could be abandoned.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful overview of this debate, including a review of sources, see Robert C. Sampson, *A Survey of the Debate Over U.S. Nuclear Policy 1996-1998*, Occasional Paper, Center for Global Security and Cooperation, SAIC, September 1998. Sampson prefers a taxonomy that identifies three camps: abolitionists, minimalists, and traditionalists.

a fuller appreciation of the range of possibilities that may await us.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the policy community is likely to gain a clearer appreciation of how U.S. choices made today will shape the long-term evolution of the problem in ways that suit U.S. interests.

The focus of this analysis is the nuclear planning environment such as it might exist in the year 2015. This date is chosen for a number of reasons. In that time frame, the United States will face a series of basic decisions about whether, when, and how to modernize the triad, as current delivery systems begin to reach the end of their service lives. There should also be some clearer sense of the trajectory of international politics by then: the sense of transition that now dominates thinking about the post-Cold War era will very likely have given way to some new concept of the essential dynamics of relations of power in the interstate system. The year 2015 is far enough into the future that new things become thinkable, but not so far into the future that we cannot have a good sense of the range of reasonable possibilities.

This paper proceeds as follows. It begins with an exploration of alternative geopolitical futures. The purpose here is to scope out the range of feasible alternatives that ought to concern policymakers. A key argument developed here is that we must think well beyond the simple disaggregation of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar possibilities.

The paper then elaborates the different nuclear postures associated with each of the alternative futures. The purpose here is to gain some sense of the reasonable variance among alternative possibilities. A key argument developed here is that the posture must be conceived in the broadest possible terms, to include not just operational features but also roles, missions, strategies, and infrastructure.

The paper then considers how to think about navigating the course from today to 2015. The purpose here is to challenge the assumption that America will merely be the victim of events to which it must respond. A key argument developed here is that the

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<sup>3</sup> The term “unsimplify” is borrowed from a specialist on Africa, Helen Kitchen of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who has said her chief purpose as an Africa scholar in Washington is to help the policy community better appreciate Africa as it actually exists—a pastiche of political, economic, and social factors—and to refute the one-dimensional caricature of the continent that typically dominates U.S. thinking. Because the nuclear future has been caricatured in much the same way that Africa has been, the term “unsimplify” seems fitting to the usage adopted here.

worst case that guides current thinking among the nuclear guardians may not be the worst case that actually plays out. Another key argument is that the nuclear future will be determined as much by choices America makes about geopolitics as by the choices it makes about nuclear weapons.

## ALTERNATIVE GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

Nearly a decade ago, the abolitionists began the debate about geopolitics and nuclear futures, arguing that the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War confrontation had engendered the necessary conditions for rapidly de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in international politics and eliminating Cold War forces. In the lead-but-hedge strategy adopted by the Clinton administration, they came to emphasize leading.

In reply, the nuclear guardians have emphasized hedging. They have held to the conviction that U.S. national security requires maintenance of a strong nuclear deterrent as a hedge for the foreseeable future. But a hedge against what? Within this camp there appears to be a good deal less consensus about what we are hedging against than about the necessity to hedge. Four quite different visions animate their thinking. Briefly, they are *Cold War redux*, *anarchic multipolarity*, *prolonged unipolarity*, and "*a new medievalism*." In Cold War redux, the bipolar confrontation of the Cold War era is replayed with the emergence of a new peer competitor to the United States, thus pitching the world back into nuclear confrontation. In anarchic multipolarity, the world order shifts from a global basis to a competitive regional one. In prolonged unipolarity, the phase of world affairs in which the United States is the dominant actor, whose power is essentially uncontested by other major states or coalitions of actors, extends for decades ahead. In a new medievalism,<sup>4</sup> national allegiances and competitions are submerged under trans- and sub-national forces, generating violence within states, spilling over to violence among them. In short, the guardians argue, whether the world is bipolar, multipolar, unipolar, or non-polar, the United States is going to need nuclear weapons.

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<sup>4</sup> The term is used by Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 254–294.

What does it mean to begin to “unsimplify” this view? We might begin by recognizing that there are positive and negative variations of each of these 'polar' futures.

A bipolar world could be very stressing on the foreign and defense policies of the United States if indeed a peer competitor were to emerge and utilize military means to contest American influence and challenge American interests globally. Conceivably, either Russia or China could fill this role. But a more benign possibility must also be considered. Even if by the year 2015 China has emerged as the second most powerful country in the world, confrontation between the two most powerful nations may not occur. So long as China remains inwardly focused, does not pursue a Soviet-style Brezhnev doctrine to project and protect revolutionary ambitions internationally, and seeks “constructive strategic partnership” with the United States, a bipolar world could be relatively relaxed in its security dimensions.

A multipolar world could be very stressing in a number of different ways. A world dominated by a hostile triangular relationship between the United States, Russia, and China could be very messy and find Washington laboring to promote stability in a complex balance-of-power system. A world consisting of smaller regional orders, each dominated by a local nuclear hegemon, or by a competition between local nuclear powers, could prove even more complex. But there are also more benign multipolar possibilities in which the major actors are in approximate balance and cooperating to pursue common political and economic goals.

A unipolar world could also prove stressing for the United States. Prolonged hegemony could result in the emergence of a tier of countries opposed to American influence of all kinds—military, political, economic, or even social—with world events drifting increasingly into a pattern of relations that might be characterized as “The West versus the Rest.”<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, if no nation or group of nations emerges to contest America's preeminent status, and assuming Americans choose to remain engaged on the

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<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to Kishore Mahbubani, “The West and the Rest,” *The National Interest*, No. 28 (Summer 1992), pp. 3–12.)

world scene for an extended period, the United States could well preside over deepening patterns of cooperation.

A non-polar world could see the eruption of new trans- and sub-national forces that express themselves violently. Alternatively, a non-polar world could see the emergence of transnational processes and interests that effectively suppress conflict among states, and even perhaps within them. In a hostile non-polarity, terrorism—even terrorism with weapons of mass destruction—could become more commonplace. In a benign non-polarity, the Internet age could focus social forces on the common aspiration to become more prosperous.

In 1999, it is impossible to know which version of polarity is most likely to prevail in 2015. Indeed, it seems unlikely that sufficient time will have passed in the intervening period for any one feature to dominate. The world of 2015 is likely to have features of each of the postulated systems. By the year 2025 or 2050, something clearer may well have emerged. But in 2015, the salient distinction may be not so much between various forms of polar order as between the benign and stressing versions of one, another, or all of them. Here too it is impossible to know which variant is most likely to prevail in 2015, but it is not impossible to understand something of how the trajectory might be determined.

As professional pessimists, those in the policy community interested in relations of power among states have widely embraced “the new world disorder” as a framework for thinking about the prospects for war and peace in the period ahead. Especially among the nuclear guardians there is a widespread conviction that the drift of politics will inevitably take us toward one of the hostile variants of the alternatives described above. This way of thinking has drawn strong words of caution from distinguished historian of international relations Paul W. Schroeder.

Most of the writing about the new world order has been done by policy specialists, but the rest of us should not allow them to coopt entirely the discussion of post-cold war order. After all, they are usually preoccupied with the present, looking little beyond the immediate task of defending or criticizing the specific policy initiatives by the United States on the world scene. Questions of order and disorder in the

international system cannot be brought into focus in this fashion. Here the historian has something unique to offer...This historian's perspective is that the policy pundits have it wrong. A new world disorder has not replaced the new world order. The historic moment has not passed.... A genuinely new and effective world order has emerged in the last 50 years...The evidence of it is by now so familiar that Americans take it for granted and fail to see how startling it is in historical perspective.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of the argument developed in this paper, let us simply stipulate that Schroeder is onto something here. Let us understand that order as the embodiment of the norms, institutions, and processes that have evolved since the height of World War II aimed at protecting common political, economic, and security interests. Call it a liberal world order, in the more traditional meaning of the world liberal, one built on the foundations of the free exchange of ideas and material goods. Or call it a Pax Americana, built on American values and American power. Whatever it is called, unsimplifying our view of the future requires that we consider the future evolution of this order and the way that evolution will impact on the stressing/benign dynamic. How might the norms, institutions, and processes that constitute the present world order evolve and what might that evolution imply about whether the more or less benign forms of the alternative polarities materialize? Rather than think about alternative polar orders, let us speculate about the way in which the distribution of power in the system will be determined by the manner in which the present order has survived into the year 2015.

By the year 2015, three salient possibilities seem likely: order enlarged, stagnant order, contested order. In an order enlarged, the community of nations committed to democracy and the free market, and willing to accept American stewardship of the institutions of order, would have grown in number, and their depth of commitment deepened. In a stagnant order, those inside the relatively peaceful and prosperous zone would continue to progress, while those outside the zone would have very different degrees of security and prosperity.<sup>7</sup> In a contested order, disgruntlement would have

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<sup>6</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, "The New World Order: A Historical Perspective," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 25-43.

<sup>7</sup> Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace/Zones of Turmoil* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, 1993).

given way to ideological division and military assertiveness by those opposed to the hegemonic position of the West and the United States in particular.

Whether the world order of 2015 will be benign or stressing seems likely to depend largely on whether the current order enlarges, stagnates, or becomes contested. If it enlarges, we are likely to encounter the more benign variants of the different polar futures. In such a world there would be many powerful actors, but with little to fight about. If it stagnates, we are likely to encounter some of the less welcome variants of multipolarity. In such a world there might be a fair amount of violence in unstable regions but not much concern about the unsettling of relations of power among the major powers. If it becomes contested, we are likely to encounter the more stressing variants of bipolarity, if Russia or China emerges to contest U.S. influence regionally and globally, or of non-polarity, with many new forms of terrorism, much of it directed at the United States as the principal protector of the status quo.

By unsimplifying the futures debate in this way, it is possible to bring into focus a range of alternative futures much broader than typically debated by the two camps in the nuclear debate. We cannot build nuclear policies on assumptions about the future world order that cannot be tested today. By 2015, the world is unlikely to be significantly more bipolar, multipolar, unipolar, or non-polar than today. But by 2015, the prevailing order will have enlarged, stagnated, or become contested, with a significant impact on the degree of stress with which U.S. foreign and defense policies will be asked to cope.

## **ALTERNATIVE NUCLEAR POSTURES**

What if the world heads to 2015 along one of the benign trajectories? What type of nuclear posture might be seen in Washington as best serving the nation's interests?

In a world defined by pacific bipolarity, the overall posture might well be defined by small numbers of not particularly modern weapons kept on low alert rates with an overriding emphasis on mutual assured safety. To the extent the posture accounts for the need to hedge against a future degradation of the nuclear planning environment, that hedge might well be founded on the assumption that reconstitution of a more robust force would be necessary only with long lead times.

In a world defined by stable multipolarity, the overall posture might well be defined by moderate numbers of warheads postured in a minimum deterrent with an overriding emphasis on survivability in crisis. The hedge might well be founded on the assumption that the deterrent will require long-term sustainment but need not be postured for arms racing.

In a world of uncontested unipolarity, nuclear weapons might become to their owners what the Faberge eggs were to the Russian czar—a treasure that is taken out occasionally to impress visitors to court with the wizardry and power of the ruler. The hedge would be embodied in retention of the scientific and technical base that first produced the weapons.

In a world in which state-centric conflict has effectively disappeared as a major organizing principle for U.S. military forces, the U.S. nuclear posture would perhaps emphasize latent capabilities over deployed assets.

If there is a path to nuclear abolition in the medium term, it is most likely one of these paths. Sooner or later, the United States and the other nuclear weapon states could opt to abandon an active force because the perceived utilities have simply withered away. This perception could be reinforced by an incident or accident that somehow accentuates the perceived risks of nuclear retention.

But what about the more stressing variants? What nuclear postures might make sense in the stressing futures posited above?

In the "new medievalism," in which the United States could be coping with rampant terrorism as its primary national security concern, the nuclear posture would seem likely to emphasize defenses over offenses, and conventional means to attack groups targeting the United States, as opposed to nuclear means. In a bid to engage others more actively in improving security of their nuclear arsenals and infrastructures, in order to minimize terrorist access, the United States might opt to promote unprecedented enhanced controls and transparency on its own arsenal and infrastructure.

In "the West versus the Rest," U.S. defense strategy would likely be dictated by the vulnerability of the United States and its allies to the strategic reach of the challengers



to its influence. The role of the U.S. nuclear deterrent could well be modest if the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons to the challengers has not accelerated and if conventional weaponry is shown to be capable of adequately punishing aggressors and denying them their war aims. But that role could well be more substantial if there is a general breakdown in the negotiated restraint that characterizes most regions and developing countries then arm themselves to contest U.S. influence. The hedge would be reflected in the conventional power projection force.

What about hostile bipolarity, in which a peer enemy emerges to contest U.S. influence globally and militarily? Such an enemy would not have to equal the United States in all measures of power, but it would have to be willing and able to contest the presence of the United States in regions of interest to it and to do so with military, political, and ideological means. Moreover, it would have to be willing and able to threaten ruinous escalatory costs to the United States. In this scenario, the U.S. nuclear posture would return to a more competitive mode, with an emphasis on modern and ready forces kept at high alert. If that peer enemy were to be Russia, the U.S. strategic posture probably would be constructed to inhibit Russian nuclear adventurism in its near abroad and neighboring regions and to deter Russian attack on core U.S. interests in the Middle East and Europe. If that peer were to be China, the U.S. posture probably would be constructed to deter provocative military behavior by China in East Asia and to prevent Chinese attempts to coerce the United States by nuclear means when the U.S. uses military force in some area of interest to China. In both cases, the nuclear force would also be expected to serve a reassurance function for U.S. allies and friends in territories neighboring Russia or China (to the effect that peer enemy aggression will not be made at their expense). If in the interim nuclear weapons do not regain their now eroded reputation for being usable for offensive missions, it may be that renewed nuclear competition will not also bring with it the most worrisome forms of arms racing and instability such as seen in certain phases of the Cold War.

There are at least three variants of stressing multipolarity that merit consideration here, as they would have very different impacts on the U.S. posture.

The first of these is ambiguous adversarial tripolarity. In this scenario, neither Russia nor China rises to the status of enemy. Though adversaries of the United States, they are not actively hostile to it, and they seek opportunities to cooperate to advance common interests. But both resist U.S. hegemony and sometimes make common cause toward that end, while at other times showing wariness of each other. For all three, the central strategic issue would be how to posture their forces so that no one perceives advantages to be gained in seeking strategic preeminence over the other two. Deterrence would play a role in the nuclear triangle, but so too would reassurance, in the sense that each would need to be satisfied that the situation is stable. Latent capabilities might play a very large hedging role in such a posture, as each side signals the other that more conflictual relations could be met with a steady resurgence of overt capability. The three would face a major political challenge in somehow convincing the rest of the world that their uncertain strategic relations do not portend future arms racing. Such a belief could prove deeply unsettling to the nonproliferation regime.

The second of these stressing multipolar scenarios is one dominated by nuclear-armed regional challengers. The rogues survive as die-hard outcasts of the international system, possibly joined by new WMD-armed outcasts—Serbia, for example. The United States would prefer to meet such challenges with improved conventional forces and advanced capabilities to fight and survive on battlefields contaminated by chemical and biological weapons. But it may prove unable to do so. In this scenario, the United States would likely think increasingly of nuclear weapons in a regional war-fighting mode, to conduct counterforce strikes on NBC weapons that cannot be destroyed by conventional means, and would become more conscious of the utility of nuclear signaling for purposes of crisis coercion and local reassurance. Deterrence would no longer be the first and only consideration. Ballistic missile defenses would seem likely to have gained much greater importance for the United States in this scenario as a hedge against a rapid erosion in the security environment.

The third and final variant is nuclear anarchy. Conceivably, the nuclear order we have known could have begun to disintegrate by the year 2015. More countries could follow India and Pakistan to nuclear status. The United Nations Security Council could

finally and definitively fail in its efforts to deal with WMD threats in Iraq and North Korea, among other places. Some of the states that have relinquished NBC weapons could reverse their decisions. Some U.S. friends and allies could, like Israel, conclude that the United States cannot meet their security needs and that a nuclear deterrent is necessary (Egypt or Turkey, for example). A catalytic event, such as a regional war in which NBC weapons are used, could cause leaders in many states to fear a nuclear breakout, of which they could not afford to be victims.

In such a world, the U.S. nuclear posture would likely be constructed to provide tout d'azimuth deterrence, backed by heavy reliance on strategic defenses. Reassuring the American public that they are safe from attack could replace deterrence as the central concern of decision-makers assembling the necessary posture. Conceivably, the United States could retreat into a Fortress America posture aimed at recreating its past isolation and backed by strategic defenses and offensive forces sufficient to defeat and punish those who would attack it. In this scenario, having abandoned its regional guarantor roles, the United States would have no extended deterrence concerns. If this scenario were also to see nuclear independence by Europe and Japan, an interesting question arises about how the United States would conduct a graceful retreat from its extended deterrence role.

A number of assumptions underpin this sketch of the nuclear future:

- There is no civil war in Russia or China or, if one occurs, NBC weapons remain in the shadows.
- There is no regional war that creates dramatic new political realities vis-a-vis nuclear weapons. Such a war could be seen to have demonstrated the feasibility of nuclear aggression or the utility of nuclear weapons in blackmailing the United States.
- There is no nuclear accident that similarly transforms political realities.
- Biotechnology does not unleash a major new problem beyond that already present in the biological weapons domain.
- Americans remain willing to run the risks of power projection in an NBC world, with the exception of the final scenario.

The purpose of thinking through these alternative scenarios, both benign and stressing, is to gain some sense of the reasonable variance among alternative possibilities. What general observations follow?

In the benign environments, numbers and types of weapons may not matter much to U.S. leaders; survivability and to an increasing extent safety would seem likely to matter much more. In some such futures, the breakout risks associated with abolition may seem lower than the political and security consequences of retention. Latent capabilities and reserve and inactive assets seem likely to play an increasingly important role in the overall posture. Multilateral arms control would have significant roles to play as well in the benign scenarios. A key variable is the degree of emphasis placed on hedging against possible erosion on the security environment and the perceived speed of the contemplated reconstitution effort. The other key variable is the degree of emphasis placed on leading toward new forms of negotiated restraint and transparency.

In the stressing environments, numbers and types would likely matter a good deal more. Modern weapons are likely to seem important to U.S. decision-makers if we find ourselves in a world in which others are building new weapons targeted on the United States. The political demands on nuclear strategy and the roles and missions for nuclear forces could range from moderate to substantial and conceivably could exceed those that existed during the Cold War. In some variants of the stressing futures, renewed theater nuclear roles are likely to be important, with the attendant requirements associated with regional deterrence (and distinct modes of signaling) and regional reassurance. The capacity of the infrastructure to generate rapid and substantial reactions to sudden reversals in the security environment is also likely to be prized. A key variable is the degree of hope that patterns of restraint can be reinvigorated and that the process toward de-emphasizing and abolishing nuclear weapons can somehow be restored.

In sum, between abolition and anarchy is a range of feasible alternatives that should also attract our attention. Nuclear weapons and capabilities may be around for a very long time, although if they are, their future roles may well differ from their past ones. Alternatively, the nuclear problem that so many see as intractable may be eclipsed by entirely new factors.

## NAVIGATING TO 2015

As noted earlier, the Clinton administration has adopted a nuclear strategy of lead but hedge. Although future administrations are likely to find a new nomenclature to put their own mark on nuclear strategy, the twin goals—and the challenges of balancing them—are likely to be around so long as the nuclear future seems up for grabs.

In emphasizing the *hedge* in the lead-but-hedge strategy, the nuclear guardians seem ready to bet on the evolution of the international system over the next decade or two in ways that bring the more stressing environments into being. Their arguments would be more compelling, however, if they were tied to specific if notional future requirements of U.S. national security and international stability, rather than to existential deterrence and the theology of nuclear security as it emerged in the Cold War. This analysis points to many ways in which the hedging function may evolve over the next two decades. The nuclear guardians tend to worry about the supposed worst of the worst cases and accordingly seek to maintain a hedge against the reappearance of a peer military enemy. But if such an enemy actually emerges, the political will to regenerate a nuclear posture sufficient to the challenge seems likely to arise. The more difficult worst case is the one in which existing missions outlive the political will to sustain the infrastructure necessary to support them.

In emphasizing leading over hedging, the abolitionists seem to be betting on the most benign environments. They are ready to cut faster and deeper, assuming Russia can be brought along (and perhaps even without waiting for Russia). Their arguments would be more compelling, however, if they more fully elaborated how the changes in political relations among actors in the international system brought about by abolition would make the post-nuclear peace viable and durable. This analysis points to many ways in which the leading function may evolve. There may be many fruitful opportunities to push nuclear weapons further back into the shadows of international politics, but those opportunities may also be blunted if the trajectory of international politics proves unhelpful.

But America ought not want to be the victim of political trajectories. As the most powerful actor in the international system, it certainly has exceptional opportunities to shape events in ways conducive to its interests. Its choices in the nuclear domain will

have far-reaching implications. How and where it chooses to lead, and to hedge, will have an impact on others. To be sure, its power is not sufficient to secure any particular future; but its power is sufficient to set agendas, build coalitions, and work toward common goals. If it seeks a world in which nuclear weapons are increasingly irrelevant, it is going to have to concern itself with the trajectory of international politics as much as the paraphernalia of nuclear deterrence. Put differently, the nuclear future will be determined as much by America's choices about geopolitics as by its choices about nuclear weapons.

It is useful here to return to Paul Schroeder's arguments (see pp. 6–7). Constructing a world in which nuclear weapons are increasingly irrelevant means acting to ensure that the present world order, such as it is, is enlarged in the decades ahead. If Schroeder is right, the United States must begin by recognizing that the world order is something more substantial and consensual than a status quo distribution of power with America at the top of the heap. This is a particular challenge for an America that has security guarantor roles abroad. How can it protect and extend the world order without also conveying the impression that the use of its power is nothing more than self-serving? How can it do so without also conveying the impression that the order serves no one other than its most powerful member (and its friends)?

Elsewhere I have elaborated a set of tasks of U.S. policy associated with enlarging the current order and ensuring that it does not stagnate or become contested.<sup>8</sup>

- (1) Recognize the unprecedented absence of significant risk of war among the major powers and sustain their generally pacific relations as long as possible, even as factors among and within them change; failure to do this could motivate Russia or China to emerge as balancers to American influence.
- (2) Integrate into the existing institutions of world order the many developing countries that are gaining stability and wealth and with it the aspiration to international status; failure to do this could lead rising powers to become revisionist ones.
- (3) Deter and, where necessary, defeat and punish the handful of regimes that have acquired banned weapons and used them in the service of aggressive

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<sup>8</sup> See Brad Roberts, "World Order in the *Post-Post* Cold War Era: Beyond the Rogue State Problem," IDA Document D-1925, Institute for Defense Analyses, September 1996; and "Arms Control in the Emerging Strategic Environment," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (April 1997).

purposes; failure to do this would be seen as portending the future disintegration of the present order.

- (4) Manage the ongoing global diffusion of dual-use technologies in ways that promote transparency and use according to agreed norms; failure to do this would precipitate the rapid proliferation of high-leverage weaponry.
- (5) Anchor American power in international institutions and processes sufficient to the needs of their sustained functioning; failure to do this would signal that in America's unipolar moment it will either act unrestrained on the world stage--or retreat from it.

The failure to accomplish these tasks, or otherwise to fulfill Paul Schroeder's ambition of enlarging the present order, would likely set international affairs on the trajectories that produce the more stressing nuclear planning environments. We should recognize the impact of America's nuclear choices on each of these tasks.

On item 5, for example, Washington's nuclear strategy choices will be read by many for what they seem to convey about America's intent to remain engaged as a global security guarantor, its willingness to continue to promote nuclear restraint with others, and its ability to resist the 'siren song' of nuclear superiority as a means to perpetuate its hegemonic role.

On item 4, the on-going diffusion of dual-use technologies has produced a rising sense of futility in Washington about the effective control of these technologies through export licensing systems and ad hoc cooperation with other exporters. If the United States loses faith in the effectiveness of such policy tools in constraining proliferation and promoting the peaceful use of sensitive technologies, others may seek commercial and even military advantage in ways that reinforce a sense of looming nuclear anarchy.

On item 3, if the United States fails to arm itself with the means to defeat such aggression without recourse to nuclear attack, it may find that regional NBC wars will change the world dramatically, by casting America as a nuclear-armed bully that must be resisted, or as a nuclear-armed wimp that can't be counted on to act when the chips are

down. Handled properly, such wars can solidify U.S. leadership, confirm its stewardship of common interests, and deter future regional challengers.<sup>9</sup>

On item 2, international nuclear politics are likely to play a large role over the next two decades in determining the orientation of aspiring powers to the existing world order. The multilateral arms control regime reflects a major 'buy in' to the existing world order by many of them. Many major and minor powers also view multilateral arms control processes as a way to debate the allocation of rights, roles, and responsibilities with the United States.

On item 1, although major power relations have entered a decidedly new era, our concepts have not kept pace. Deterrence remains the cornerstone of strategic logic, and 'enemies' remain the object of deterrence. But neither Russia nor China is an enemy as such. To be sure, the United States wishes to structure incentives for these countries to minimize the likelihood of conflict—especially nuclear conflict. It also wishes to reinforce positive developments with both. The U.S. nuclear agenda appears fairly clear in outline, though possible Russian abandonment of parity would have unexplored implications for the United States. The U.S. agenda with China appears less clear, especially as China reacts to developments in U.S. missile defenses. The trilateral U.S.-Russia-China aspects appear undeveloped conceptually.

The purpose of the preceding analysis is simply to underscore the point that the United States may help make its nuclear future with policy choices and actions far beyond the usual parameters of numbers of weapons and offense/defense considerations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thinking about the nuclear future has fallen prey to the debate between the abolitionists and guardians of the deterrent. But each camp proceeds from a very different set of assumptions. Moreover, their thinking about the future international security environment is typically driven by a mix of best- or worst-case analyses, simple

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<sup>9</sup> "Rethinking How Wars Must End: NBC War Termination Issues and Major Regional Contingencies," in Victor Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).



linear projections, and dubious historical analogies. This does a disservice to our national ability to bring into being a nuclear world that best serves the national interest.

By disaggregating some rather simplistic views of the future, important insights can be gained into the nuclear planning environment as it might exist in 2015. The important variations among the feasible alternative futures are likely to be found not in the extent to which they are bipolar, multipolar, unipolar, or nonpolar, but in the extent to which new patterns of relations have emerged that are either stressing for U.S. foreign and defense policies or relatively benign. In the benign scenarios, nuclear abolition is not out of the question. In the stressing ones, the nuclear posture of today, such as it has aged to the year 2015, is likely to be seen as inadequate to the need.

In the nuclear futures debate, the twin themes of lead and hedge seem likely to be with us for a long time. The optimal balance between lead and hedge varies from scenario to scenario, but so long as we have not sunk into a world of nuclear anarchy, America's political leadership is likely to want to pursue both goals. But leading toward the kind of world in which nuclear weapons are irrelevant—or simply escaping a world in which the worst possibilities come true—requires embracing an agenda of actions well beyond the nuclear domain and aimed at extending and deepening the existing world order.

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